

Message Text

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SUBJECT: VATICAN APPOINTS MONSIGNOR MERCEICA AS NEW
ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA

REF: VALLETTA 1373, 74 VALLETTA A-91,

1. MONSIGNOR GIUSEPPE (JOSEPH) MERCEICA HAS BEEN APPOINTED BY THE VATICAN AS THE NEW ARCHBISHOP OF MALTA, TO SUCCEED THE RETIRING SIR MICHAEL GONZI. MONSIGNOR MERCEICA WAS BORN AT RABAT IN GOZO, ON NOVEMBER 28, 1928, AND WAS ORDAINED A PRIEST IN 1952. SINCE JULY 1974, HE HAS BEEN SERVING IN MALTA AS AUXILIARY BISHOP TO ARCHBISHOP GONZI.

2. PRESS STORIES REFER TO MONSIGNOR MERCEICA AS "THE SON OF A WINE MERCHANT", WHOSE FATHER OPERATES THE "TRULY FRIEND TO ALL BAR" IN THE "VICINITY OF ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH IN RABAT". THE NEW ARCHBISHOP HAS TWO BROTHERS, ONE OF WHOM IS A SCHOOL TEACHER, AND THE OTHER A PRIEST.

3. MONSIGNOR MERCEICA STUDIED AT THE LATERAN UNIVERSITY AND THE GREGORIAN UNIVERSITY IN ROME, AS WELL AS AT OXFORD UNIVERSITY IN ENGLAND. IN 1961, HE WAS APPOINTED
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RECTOR OF THE GOZO SEMINARY, AND IN 1969 HE WAS TRANSFERRED

TO ROME AS A JUDGE OF THE SACRA ROTA. HE RETURNED TO MALTA IN 1974 TO BECOME AUXILIARY BISHOP.

4. COMMENT: MERECIECA'S APPOINTMENT CAME AFTER SEVERAL WEEKS OF INTENSE NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN VALLETTA AND THE VATICAN, INCLUDING NUMEROUS TRIPS TO ROME BY GOM REPRESENTATIVES AS WELL AS BY ARCHBISHOP GONZI AND OTHER SENIOR MALTESE CHURCH OFFICIALS. IT REMAINS TO BE SEEN JUST HOW FREE A HAND THE 91-YEAR-OLD "ARCHBISHOP EMERITUS" GONZI WILL ALLOW MERECIECA TO HAVE IN MALTESE CHURCH AFFAIRS. RUMOR HAS IT THAT GONZI WILL ATTEMPT TO MAINTAIN AT LEAST SOME CONTROL AND INFLUENCE BEHIND THE SCENES, AIDED AND ABETED BY PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF. MERECIECA IS VERY MUCH AN UNKNOWN QUANTITY AT THIS POINT CONCERNING HIS ATTITUDE TOWARD FUTURE CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN THIS VERY CATHOLIC, BUT SELF-STYLED (BY MINTOFF) "DEMOCRATIC-SOCIALIST" COUNTRY. BECAUSE OF UNEASE CONCERNING POSSIBLE DIFFICULTIES WITH A NEW ARCHBISHOP, MINTOFF INTERVENED WITH THE VATICAN TO KEEP GONZI IN PLACE AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. BUT, AFTER 33 YEARS, THE OLD CLERICAL ORDER HAS FINALLY CHANGED IN MALTA, AT LEAST OFFICIALLY. END COMMENT. WIGGINS

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